Abstract

I put forth two main arguments in the present study. First, that an adequate understanding of a number of Rabbinic Hebrew passages originating in Roman Palestine depends on a fuller appreciation of their employment of proximate and distant deixis. Interestingly, already the rabbinic scholars of Babylonia fail to recognize the distinction between proximate and distant deixis. Thus, the second argument, that though this distinction is known in Biblical Hebrew, its preservation among Palestinian rabbis is due to its vitality in Greek and so counts as contact-induced maintenance.

It is generally accepted that Biblical Hebrew (BH) demonstratives ‘fall into two series. The “near” or “immediate” demonstratives refer to someone or something that is relatively near the speaker or relatively present to the imagination. The “far” or “remote” demonstratives refer to someone or something relatively distant,’ and that Rabbinic Hebrew (RH) conforms to this pattern. The singular zeh/zô/zô’t and the plural ‘elleh function as the proximate deictic, habû’ as the remote. The present study argues that early Palestinian rabbis recognized this BH distinction in their midrashic writings, and

1 Jonathan Gribetz, Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal and Gary Rendsburg all read versions of this paper and offered valuable comments. I first presented these arguments at a study group hosted by David Brodsky and Andrew Nagel, and I thank them for their invitation. Thanks also to the anonymous readers at JSS for their helpful comments.

2 B.K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN 1990), §17.1a.

3 The latter assertion has been challenged. See K. Ehlich, Verwendungen der Deixis beim sprachlichen Handeln: Linguistisch-philologische Untersuchungen zum hebräischen deiktischen System (Frankfurt am Main 1979), who argues that habû’ is not the remote demonstrative, but rather an anaphoric deictic that is used in indirect speech (in contrast with zeh, which appears in direct speech). On the medial demonstratives, not discussed in what follows, see W. Randall Garr, ‘The Medial Demonstratives וּלְהֵם, וַלְּהָם, and וָלְהָם’, JSOT 32 (2008), 383–9.
employed a similar distinction in their non-exegetical discourse. However, the failure of later Babylonian rabbis to recognize the deictic elements in some earlier passages may indicate the significance of the broader linguistic environment in the maintenance of deixis in Palestinian rabbinic circles.

Palestinian rabbis use deixis in both interpretive and non-interpreive contexts. An example of the former is the interpretation of Exod. 12:2 preserved in the Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael:

§1. ‘This month (ḥaḥōdeš hazzeh) shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you’ (Exod. 12:2): Rabbi Akiva says, this is one of the three matters that proved difficult for Moses to understand, all of which God pointed out to him with His finger. So also you interpret ‘These are impure for you (w’zeh lākem haṭṭāmē)’ among the creatures that swarm upon the earth’ (Lev. 11:29), and so also you interpret ‘This is the work of the candelabrum (w’zeh ma’asēh hammenōrâ)’ (Num. 8:4).

In §1, Rabbi Akiva frames a series of verses containing zeh as part of a conversation (not attested in Scripture) between God and Moses, in which God introduces three matters — the month, the impure animals and the candelabrum — but Moses struggles to grasp God’s instructions. So God provides Moses with visual aids: the moon that marks the first month, the roster of impure animals, and the candelabrum, points at them ‘with His finger’, and emphatically asserts ‘this month …’, ‘these are impure …’, ‘this is the work of the candelabrum …’ On the Mekhilta’s interpretation, the demonstrative zeh has a strong proximate force, indicating the physical presence of the object under discussion and entails (or at least strongly suggests) a physical gesture.

The distinction is significant because it is theoretically possible for rabbinic interpreters to recognize proximate versus remote deixis as a trait of BH without employing it in their own discourse.


On the philological superiority of this reading to ‘as if with a finger’ (attested in some MSS), see H. Fox, “As if with a Finger”: The Text History of an Expression Avoiding Anthropomorphism (Hebrew), Tarbiz 49 (1980), 278–91. For a discussion of the issue and a critique of Fox’s broader argument, see Y. Lorberbaum, Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv 2004), 71–3.

The same assumption underlies Rabbi Eliezer’s interpretation of Exod. 15:2 (‘this is my God, and I will praise him’) in Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael, Shirata 3
An example of non-midrashic deixis is found in the early Amoraic Bereshit Rabbah, which recounts the following (fictional) culinary encounter between the Jewish patriarch and the Roman emperor:

§2. Our Rabbi [i.e. Rabbi Judah the Patriarch] prepared a feast for Antoninus on the Sabbath. He set before him cold dishes, he ate of them and they pleased him. He made for him a feast on a weekday and set before him hot dishes. He said to him those (‘ôtan) pleased me more than these (‘ēlleh). He said to him, they lack one seasoning ... 8

The didactic force of the exchange is clear enough: even though the Sabbath meal is cold and its weekday counterpart steaming hot, the emperor prefers the former to the latter because it has been ‘flavoured’ by the Sabbath: ‘ôtan pleased me more than ‘ēlleh’. As the pragmatics of the exchange make clear, the deictic pronouns have a different scope: ‘ēlleh denotes the weekday dishes currently before the emperor, while ‘ôtan denotes the Sabbath dishes consumed between one and six days prior, and in any case not coincident with Antoninus’s statement.

In both §1 and §2, the distinction between proximate and remote deixis is clear and generally congruent with BH, though two points of difference are of note. Passage §1 understands zeh as a very strong proximate deixis in which the indicated object is physically present to the speakers — this moon, this candelabrum, these are impure — a much greater deictic force than biblical usage warrants (see the discussion below). And §2 employs the nota accusativi (in suffixed form) ‘ôtan as the remote deictic marker, a phenomenon not attested in BH.9

Scarcely Recognized Instances of Rabbinic Deixis

Despite the relatively explicit nature of proximate-remote deixis in the above passages, the phenomenon has gone unrecognized elsewhere. Consider the Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael’s interpretation of Exod. 13:8, ‘You shall tell your child on that day (bayyôm hahû),

(Horovitz and Rabin, Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, 126–7), on which see D. Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington, IN 1990), 117–21.

9 Miguel Pérez Fernández explains this development as the result of ‘the particle את strengthen[ing] its originally determinative or deictic force’, M.Pérez Fernández, An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew, translated by J. Elwolde (Leiden 1999), 23.
“On account of this (ba’âbûr zeh) the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt”.

§3. I might understand this to mean from the first day of the month, Scripture teaches, saying ‘on that day (bayyôm habû)’. If ‘on that day’ I might understand this to mean on the preceding day, Scripture teaches saying ba’abûr zeh — at the time that the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs are set before you on your table.

This derashah involves two linguistic issues, one deictic (discussed below), another lexical, to which I now turn. BH ba’âbûr is most commonly a preposition that means ‘for the sake of’ or ‘on account of’. But this meaning is unlikely for Exod. 13:8, as the previous verse prohibits possessing leavened bread during the festival now associated with Passover: ‘Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory’ (Exod. 13:7). A causal link between the absence of leavened bread and the exodus is improbable. As William Propp notes in his commentary: ‘Did God take Israel from Egypt because they avoided leaven? Že(h) is rather a relative pronoun equivalent to ‘âšer and zû’.

The Mekilta recognizes the difficulty, but offers a different solution, linking ba’abûr zeh to the produce on the Passover table, a reading based on the rare biblical noun ‘âbûr, ‘agricultural produce’. The word appears twice in consecutive verses in Joshua — significantly, in the description of the Israelite’s first Passover after crossing the Jordan: ‘On the day after the passover, on that very day, they ate the produce (‘ābûr) of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce (‘ābûr) of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops

10 Hebrew: mibb’ôd yôm, which some translators render ‘in the daytime’. Since the Jewish day begins at sundown, the sense of both translations is identical.
12 W.H.C. Propp, Exodus 1–18 (Anchor Bible Series, New Haven 1999), ad loc (p. 423). The same approach is reflected in NRSV (and NJPS) ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’, as though the Hebrew were ba’abûr zeh âšer …. Through a correspondence initiated by Prof. Gary Rendsburg I have learned that Prof. Robert Holmstedt discusses this verse in his forthcoming book on the relative clause in Biblical Hebrew.
13 The connection between the rabbinic ba’abûr zeh and biblical ‘âbûr, ‘produce’, was pointed out to me years ago by Moshe Bar Asher in a seminar on Rabbinic Hebrew.
of the land of Canaan that year’ (Josh. 5:11–12). The Mekila’s gloss (‘ba’abûr zeb — at the time that the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs are set before you on your table’), links ba‘abûr zeb with ‘âbûr, ‘produce’, namely, the unleavened bread and bitter herbs to which the head of the household gestures while retelling the exodus narrative.

More importantly for the present study, the Mekila’s argument is built on the contrast between the proximate deixis of zeb and the remote deixis of hahû’ in Exod. 13:8. The Mekila first suggests the command to recount the exodus narrative might be understood to take effect on the first day of the month,14 but rejects this interpretation in light of Exodus’s command that the recounting occur bayyôm hahû’ ‘on that day’ — on the date of the exodus, the 14th of Nissan. The Mekila then offers a second interpretation: since Scripture specifies ‘on that day’, perhaps the recounting can begin on the day leading up to the Seder (mibb’ôd yôm)? But this too is rejected since the head of the household says ba‘abûr (interpreted as âbûr, ‘produce’) zeb, a proximate deixis that suggests he can gesture toward the produce on the table. The passage concludes that the commandment only takes effect at night (which is the beginning of 14th of Nisan), at the Seder table.15

Interestingly, the mechanics of the argument have gone largely unrecognized by later readers. Classical Mekila commentators almost never refer to the deixis.16 Moreover, the derashah in question is part of the Passover Haggadah and is included in Shmuel and Ze‘ev Safrai’s edition and commentary.17 They explain the midrash as follows: ‘[it] concludes from the emphasis ba‘abûr zeb that the obligation is only in effect “at the time that the unleavened bread and the

14 This reading may be motivated by Exod. 13:4, ‘Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out’.
15 Note that my claim involves the rabbinic understanding of the biblical hû’, and so is not a counterargument to Ehlich’s thesis in Verwendungen der Deixis beim sprachlichen Handeln, 666–768.
16 See the commentaries of Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (nineteenth century Russia), Birkat Hanashiv printed in Mekila of Rabbi Ishmael with the Commentaries of the Gaon of Vilna and the Nasîv (Jerusalem 1997); Rabbi Yehuda Najar (d. 1830, Tunis), Ševut Yehuda and Hayyim Palaggi (nineteenth-century Turkey) Mei Haḥ̣esed both published in Qobeṣ Mefarše Hamekilta (Jerusalem 1989). The only exception I could find is Efraim Ze‘ev Garbus (twentieth-century mandatory Palestine and Israel) Kat Hamidda, printed in Mekila Har Efraim (Jerusalem 1954), which comments on the deictic force of zeb, but not of hahû’.
bitter herbs are set before you”, that is, when the roasted paschal meat is not yet on the table, and only the unleavened bread and bitter herbs are set before the father and son’. This distinction between the unleavened bread and bitter herbs, on the one hand, and the paschal meat, on the other, is foreign to the derashah and unnecessary. The Mekilta specifies bread and herbs not as a contrast to meat, but rather because they are the produce, the ‘abûr, of Exod. 13:8, and only they are subject to the proximate zeh, rather than the remote deictic of bayyôm habû’.19

§3 is not the only tannaitic passage whose deixis has confounded later interpreters, as similar confusion attends m. Baba Batra 5.2:20

§4. If a man sells a donkey he has not sold its gear. Nahum the Mede says, He sold its gear. Rabbi Judah says, Sometimes the gear is sold, sometimes it is not sold. How so? If the donkey was before him, bearing its gear, and he said ‘Sell me this donkey of yours (hamôrkâ zô)’ — the gear is sold. [If he said …] ‘That donkey of yours’ (hamôrkâ habû’) — the gear is not sold.

Rabbi Judah’s two purchase statements have perplexed generations of interpreters. Already the Babylonian21 Amora, Rabba (early fourth century floruit), erroneously argues they are distinguished by their mood, the first indicative and the second interrogative: ‘hamôrkâ zô — he knew that it was his donkey and said to him zô on account of the gear. But he who said to him hamôrkâ hû’ did not know if it was his donkey, and said to him “Is this your donkey (hamôrkâ hû’) that you might sell it to me?” (b. B.B. 78b). As Rashi explains, ‘When he said hamôrkâ zeh22 he surely knew that it was his donkey and he should have said “sell me your donkey” [without the demonstrative zeh] … Therefore, he said zeh to indicate the gear, that is, sell me the donkey in its present state. However, hamôrkâ hû’ indicates the interrogative. He said to him: “Is this your donkey that you might sell it to me?” In which case he did not sell him the gear, for Rabbi Judah holds that one who sells the donkey without specifications has not sold the gear’.23 Unfortunately, there is no evidence to suggest that

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18 S. and Z. Safrai, Haggadah of the Sages, 214.
19 See also Yosef Tabory, who discusses the passage in, inter alia, the JPS Commentary on the Haggadah (Philadelphia 2008), 88.
20 The translation is based on the text of MS Kaufmann.
21 The Palestinian Talmud does not discuss this mishnah.
22 Zeh (and not zô) is the reading of Rashi’s commentary.
23 Rashi’s commentary as loc. This explanation is subsequently adopted by many Mishnah commentators, including Rabbi Ovadia of Bertinoro (commonly spelled:
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zeh and hāhû’ are tied to the indicative and interrogative, respectively. Contemporary scholars too have struggled to interpret this mishnah, as evidenced by Chanoch Albeck’s attempt to synthesize different explanations: ‘ḥamôrkā zeh — in its present state, with its gear; ḥamôrkā hāhû’ — ... he said to him, Sell me that donkey (hāhû’), but he did not say to him “this” (zeh), so he referred only to the donkey’.24 Again we face the same difficulty: there is no evidence that zeh refers to an animal with gear and hāhû’ to one without, so that Albeck’s ‘explanation’ merely retrojects onto the demonstratives the meaning that Rabbi Judah’s statement requires.

The earlier analysis of RH deixis clarifies the distinction between the two purchase formulas. The first uses a proximate deictic, ḥamôrkā zeh, indicating the parties are standing by the donkey in question, and the buyer gesturing — likely physically but in any case linguistically — at the beast. Under these conditions (according to Rabbi Judah), any gear borne by the donkey falls within the scope of the deictic statement and is included in the purchase. But when the buyer asks to purchase ḥamôrkā hû’, the remote demonstrative indicates the donkey in question is not visible to the speakers, so the buyer has no presumption of ownership concerning gear that may or may not be on the donkey at the time.25

Contact-Induced Maintenance?

But if the distinction between proximate and remote deixis offers a simple and linguistically cogent explanation of Rabbi Judah’s statement, it also raises a question regarding the Mishnah’s later reception. To wit, if the distinction between the proximate deixis of zeh/zô and the remote deixis of hahû’ is inherited from BH, why did the Babylonian sages patently fail to understand the difference between Rabbi Judah’s two purchase formulas? That they did indicates that continuity with BH is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the survival of the distinction in RH, and that the difference between the Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis may be due, at least in part, to the intensive linguistic contact of the latter with Greek. Indeed, I think it likely that the proximate-remote distinction in Palestinian sources owes its ongoing vitality to the ὅτι ἐκεῖνος distinction in Greek,

Bartenura), see Mishnah with Commentary of Tiferet Israel and Yakhin u-Voaz (Hebrew) (New York 1997), Tractate Neziqin, vol. 1, ad loc.

24 C. Albeck, Shishah Sidre Mishnah (Jerusalem 1959), vol. 4 (Neziqin), 134.

the former often indicating an object present to the speaker, the latter an absent one.\textsuperscript{26}

To be clear — I am not attributing to Greek a genetic role in the formation of RH deixis, which is, on the whole, continuous with BH. However, the Babylonian rabbinic community’s failure to understand the linguistically unproblematic deictic distinction in m. Baba Batra suggests the existence of a linguistic factor unique to the Palestinian environment aiding in the maintenance of the distinction. The dynamic I am proposing is analogous to the well-known phenomenon of phonetic distinctions preserved in the Hebrew of Jewish communities whose broader linguistic environment recognizes these distinctions, but lost in the Hebrew of communities broader linguistic environment does not. The distinction between, say, the realization of ‘aleph and ‘ayin is attested in the earliest strata of Hebrew, and the same distinction among Jews in a predominantly Arabic Sprachraum can be represented as a descendent of its earlier progenitor. However, the contact-induced disappearance of this distinction among Jews in predominantly Romance, Slavic and Germanic Sprachräume indicates its maintenance was no less a result of language contact.

In addition to the survival of the earlier Hebrew deictic distinction in RH, Greek language-contact may also explain some of the differences between BH and RH deixis. I noted above that RH zeh communicates a very vivid proximity, often entailing the physical presence of the denoted object. However, such a strong deictic sense is not consistently attested in BH, where zeh sometimes loses its proximate sense altogether, as in Job 1:16 ‘While this one (zeh) was still speaking, another (zeh) came and said …’, which refers to two messengers bringing Job terrible news. The one is still standing before Job and completing his report when the other enters, but despite the spatial contrast both are indicated by zeh. Exceptions such as these\textsuperscript{27} have led scholars such as Joshua Blau to conclude that ‘the clear distinction obtaining in Standard Average European between this-deixis and that-deixis does not obtain … in Biblical Hebrew’.\textsuperscript{28} And while

\begin{itemize}
\item[27] See also Ps. 75:7 ‘it is God who executes judgment, putting down one (zeh) and lifting up another (zeh)’.
\end{itemize}
I do not endorse Blau’s position (as noted above, there are firm examples of proximate and remote deixis in BH), the assumption of physical presence in RH zeh may be influenced by a parallel usage in Greek. Thus, when the apostles begin speaking in tongues and the Pentecost pilgrims who hail from different lands understand the apostles’ pronouncements in their own native tongues, many are amazed but others suppose them to be drunk. ‘But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea … these (στοιχεία) are not drunk, as you suppose …”’ (Acts 2:14–15). Note that Peter does not provide a descriptive clause to introduce the apostles, e.g., ‘these men whom you hear in your native tongues’ or ‘these men whom some of you consider to be drunk’. None is needed, since στοιχεία means ‘these men right here, present before you’. Shortly after this incident, Peter and John are arrested and questioned by the authorities as to the source of their preaching and healing. Peter responds: ‘… let it be known to all of you … that οὗτος is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ …’ (Acts 4:9–10). The man in question is likely the lame whom Peter healed in the previous chapter (Acts 3:1–10), but he is not introduced, merely indicated as standing in the presence of the speaker (‘standing before you’). This usage is congruent with the RH assumptions about the deictic force of zeh in the verses cited in §§1, 3 and 4, and in n. 7. Greek influence may also explain the unprecedented RH use of the suffixed accusative marker et as a demonstrative (‘όταν pleased me more than ēlleh’) as due to the phonetic similarity between οὗτος and στοιχεία.29

Though it is impossible to draw firm historic conclusions from rabbinic attributions, it may not be coincidence that both the Mishnah and Bereshit Rabbah passages are attributed to Rabbi Judah, who, in his capacity as Jewish patriarch, was fully immersed in Greek language and culture. The Tosefta notes of Rabbi Judah’s grandfather ‘permission was given to the House of Rabban Gamliel to teach their children Greek owing to their relation with the (Roman) government’,30 while the Palestinian Talmud makes the same point regarding Rabbi Judah himself when it lists among the things

29 I cannot currently account for the fact that οὗτος is a remote demonstrative, while στοιχεία is proximate. However, semantic changes engendered by phonetic similarity can follow a circuitous and even antithetical path. Thus, the BH root q-l-s means ‘scorn, deride’ (e.g., Jer. 20:8, Ps. 44:14), but in RH it means ‘praise, adulation’, a reversal in meaning (enantiosemy) brought about by the Greek καλός.

30 Tosefta Sot 15.8, and see the discussion in S. Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (New York 1994), 20–1.
permitted the House of Rabbi (Judah) ‘that they teach their sons Greek, as they were tied to the (Roman) government’. Perhaps the dicta associated with Rabbi Judah represent a relatively strong form of Hebrew-Greek bilingualism, and thus evidence of Greek influence on RH deixis.

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31 Palestinian Talmud Šab 6.9, 7d.